

**Forthcoming review in *World of Music* 49/3**

***In the Blood: Portrait of a Griot.* Directed by Aleksi Oksanen and Jari Järvi. Produced by Kaarna Productions. One DVD, 25 mins. In French and Dioula with English subtitles. 2005.**

The title of this DVD, a Finnish production, is provocative. What follows the colon is straightforward and reasonably accurate as a description of the filmmakers' approach and the finished product; "in the blood," however, should pique interest. Will this be an essentializing portrait of a griot, a caste, or an entire social system? Will it be sensationalism, "blood"-drenched eye candy bobbing in the wake of works on resource conflicts in Africa like *Blood from a Stone*, *Blood Diamonds*, and *Diamonds of War: Africa's Blood Diamond*? Or will it be a metaphor, unpacked within? It seems to be something of all three.

This introduction to the young griot Ousmane "Zoumana" Dembele and his music is beautifully shot and edited. Vibrant colors, rich, clear audio, and camera work sensitive to the rhythm of the subject matter reproduce the ambience in such a luscious way that audiences will be drawn in to learn more. Many documentaries fail to entice, and their makers, for lack of artistry or technical mastery, end up hobbling their well-intentioned efforts. The sequence that follows the opening scene, which acts as a prologue, begins with a fade-in to the sounds of a kora. Blackness yields to a medium close of Dembele inside a room filled with gourds and instruments, playing the kora solo. He begins to sing (in Dioula or Bwamu) a metaphorical morality song about respect and the values of family. The music becomes non-diegetic just over a minute later, as footage of a truck stuck in deep ferrous mud and efforts to free it is overlaid, its audio track preserved low beneath Dembele's song. People strategize, a man stuffs sticks and leaves into the rut ahead of a rear tire, the truck lumbers off. Dembele's song thus gains a subtle illustration in the scene of cooperation. The whole scene lasts two minutes and five seconds and ends with a fade.

Other scenes show Dembele playing djembe, djembes being constructed, a scooter ride through the city (Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina's second largest city), ensemble music-making, kids playing and studying, and a culminating outdoor party at which Dembele performs. Scenes last on average two minutes. Two longer scenes of up to three minutes show a djembe being fitted with a head, while Dembele talks about the djembe as the "heart of African culture" and the importance of carrying on tradition; and Amidou, Dembele's younger brother, playing the *djansa* rhythm on the djembe, then talking about being beaten during lessons by his brother and the merits of this pedagogical method. The longest scene is the penultimate one, four minutes and forty-five seconds of playing and dancing at the party, while Dembele talks on various topics. Footage of gorgeous faces and fabrics and high-energy dancing and playing serve as weft for the threading in and out of Dembele's reflections on playing with a clear heart, breathing through the instrument, the exchange between drummer and dancer, having an occupation, and his gratitude to God, his mother, and father. A non-diegetic reprise of the opening song and

slow-motion images of a child dancing in silhouette at sunset comprise the very short final scene, a bow-tying, non-verbal denouement.

A problem for me is that while beautiful, the images take on the appearance of a travel-channel special, because discussion of issues is absent. For starters, we get no map to locate Burkina, nor where in the country Dembele lives and works. We know nothing of when this is happening, nor who these people are. The text synopsis that opens the video treats the viewer both as ignorant of the subject matter and uninterested in taking away anything factual. While issues such as tradition and innovation, pedagogy and transmission of craft, familial relations, urban-rural dynamics, phenomenology of playing, and the role of dreams are hinted at in Dembele's words, not one is pursued, given context, or expounded. We see several instruments, from the aforementioned kora and djembe (with and without the three leaf-shaped rattles projecting up and out from the head), to a guitar, a clapperless bell, a calabash rattle, a tension drum like the Senegalese *tama*, and two-headed cylindrical drums, held horizontally and played on one head only with mallet like that used with the tension drum. We hear at least one other, a balafon. But other than the djembe, not one instrument is named, nor is mention of tuning or any other property made. Two songs are sung and translated literally, but no comment on their deeper meaning is offered. Not a hint is dropped as to what a griot/*djeli* is or their significance to their society. Why not? Multiple viewings left me wondering whether Dembele is a *djeli* or merely the son of one who plays his father's music.

The phrase "in the blood" is mentioned with a minute left in the video in a metaphorical, semi-etymological explanation of the *djeli*'s capability. To this point Dembele has said that God's gift to the *djeli* is a secret that even he cannot explain, but he knows that it makes them play differently from (and superior to) even "Africans" who have studied their instrument. He has also spoken of a dream he had as a child, in which an old, bearded man gave him to know that him he must play the djembe, not a traditional *djeli* instrument. On the other hand, references to learning and practice that both he and his brother make undermine a facile, essentialist explanation for the *djeli*'s abilities; it is clear that transmission within the family is involved. Yet when Dembele juxtaposes "djeli" and "djoli" (blood) and says that the former is derived from the latter, mystification would seem to triumph.

If this mystification can be called diegetic, for occurring on-screen, it is reproduced non-diegetically, or beyond the frame: the video's makers wrote themselves out of the script. The backstage is maintained in complete mystery. Knowledge about who they are, why they are interested this subject, and how they chose Dembele is repressed. We never see them (we are not treated to outtakes during the credits), and the identity of the one interlocutor whose voice we hear for the briefest of moments is not given. The total absence of the self-reflexive body casts a postcolonialist shadow over the project. In my opinion, documentaries must contain not only information about the object under study, but also this "metadata." Otherwise they do not entirely live up to their *raison d'être* of edification. Unfortunately, *In the Blood* loses points on both counts.

*In the Blood* will appeal, nonetheless, to a wide audience for its beauty and quality. I viewed it with a video maker and with an anthropologist, neither of whom has

in-depth knowledge of the subject, and both had good things to say about it. I would recommend it for educators looking for an engaging introductory document. Perhaps it is best used in conjunction with a documentary like *Sotigui Kouyaté: un griot moderne* (1997, directed by Mahamat Saleh Haroun), a look at the *djeli* Sotigui Kouyaté, also from Bobo-Dioulasso. It has almost none of the beauty of the DVD reviewed, but its interviews show in depth the life of a contemporary griot, one who has chosen quite a different path.

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*Blood Diamonds*, directed by Teco Henson. Gold Pictures. 2004.

*Blood Diamonds*, written and produced by Bill Brummel and June Molgaard. The History Channel, 2006.

*Blood from a Stone*, directed by Phil Tuckett, NFL Films and The History Channel, 2003.

*Blood on a Stone*, directed by Sorius Samura and Ron McCullagh, 2006?

Campbell, Greg. 2004. *Blood Diamonds*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

*Diamonds of War: Africa's Blood Diamond*, National Geographic, 2003.

Leon, Donna. 2005. *Blood from a Stone: A Commissario Guido Brunetti Mystery*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

*Sotigui Kouyaté: un griot moderne*, directed by Mahamat Saleh Haroun. M3M, 1996.

Svoray, Yavon, and Richard Hammer. 2003. *Blood from a Stone: The Quest for the Life Diamonds*. New York: Forge Books.